



◆ Periodicals ◆ Literature

◆ Keyword ◆ Title ◆ Author ◆ Topic

Search

TEXT



Like 6.9k 8+1 561

[The Free Library](#) > [Communications](#) > [News, opinion and commentary](#) > [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#) > [October 31, 1999](#)

[The Free Library](#) > [General Interest/Informational](#) > [General interest](#) > [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#) > [October 31, 1999](#)

[The Free Library](#) > [Date](#) > [1999](#) > [October](#) > [31](#) > [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#)

## L.A.'S TOXIC LEGACY : STUDY OF 11 TROUBLED SCHOOLS SHOWS DISMAL LAUSD SAFETY RECORD.

### Hoover's - Official Site

[www.hoovers.com](http://www.hoovers.com)

Company profiles, up-to-date news, & more. Search our listings now!

Like 0 8+1 0

[Link to this page](#)

Byline: Terri Hardy Sacramento Bureau

Los Angeles Unified School District has racked up a dismal environmental record at 11 troubled schools, allowing crucial safety systems to break down, using ill-prepared maintenance workers to check for hazardous gases and concealing dangers, according to a Daily News review of state and district records.

The problems set a chilling precedent as the Board of Education deliberates whether to go forward with the construction of the Belmont Learning Center, the nation's costliest high school, on a former oil field plagued with potentially explosive and toxic gases downtown.

#### Digital Cinema @ Elmhurst

[go.elmhurst.edu/Digital-Cinema](http://go.elmhurst.edu/Digital-Cinema)

Accelerated online degree program. Learn cinema &

Expense aside, a central issue in the ongoing debate over Belmont is whether the district can be trusted to maintain - or even contract out - a safety system that must last the life of the school. The vote has been tentatively scheduled for Nov. 9 but could be pushed back to as late as Nov. 23, said school board President Genethia Hayes.

Critics say the history of problems at the 11 existing district campuses where environmental safety systems are in place raise great doubt about the district's ability to set up and maintain protections anywhere else.

"Who will be responsible? Who will be in control? I have never heard that addressed in detail," said Don Mullinax, the director of the LAUSD's internal audit department who recently issued a scathing report citing misconduct of several district employees in the Belmont fiasco.

"A clear line of authority needs to be established - and that's something that the district has never had," he said.

William Panos, the new director of the district's Environmental Health and Safety branch, said he believes significant changes are being made and that past problems are being addressed.

"I can't speak for what has happened in the past, but I can assure you that we will fix what we find wrong immediately, as soon as we can," Panos said. "I am confident we are adding the resources and skills needed to handle anything. If the

### Article Details

[Printer friendly](#) [Cite/link](#) [Email](#) [Feedback](#)

Publication: [Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#)

Date: [Oct 31, 1999](#)

Words: 1638

Previous Article: ['OCTOPUS' REACHES THROUGH A CENTURY](#)

Next Article: [WITCHES BREW UP SEASONAL CEREMONIES](#)

### Related Articles

[HOW LAUSD'S DREAM BECAME A NIGHTMARE; WARNINGS ABOUT UNDERLYING OIL WELLS IGNORED WHILE DISTRICT OFFICIALS PURSUED GOAL OF BUILDING HIGH SCHOOL TAJ...](#)

[BELMONT FIX WOULD BE FIRST OF ITS KIND; STATE OFFICIAL CALLS STEP UNPRECEDENTED.](#)

[TOXIC GAS ALERT AT POLY HIGH; TESTS TO SEE IF LANDFILL'S FUMES POSE SCHOOL THREAT.](#)

[LAUSD EXPLOITS LOOPHOLE IN LAW; \\$300 MILLION SOUGHT FOR 40 NEW CAMPUSES.](#)

[EDITORIAL : NOT ONE PENNY MORE; STATE SHOULD NOT GIVE LAUSD ANY STATE FUNDS UNTIL THE DISTRICT PROVES IT'S RESPONSIBLE.](#)

[SCHOOL CANCERS LINKED TO LANDFILLS?](#)

[EDITORIAL : WHERE'S THE RAGE? SUPERINTENDENT ZACARIAS FAILS TO MOVE QUICKLY, DECISIVELY IN UNFOLDING SAFETY SCANDAL.](#)

board approves Belmont, we can handle it."

According to state and district records, the 11 campuses with safeguards against known hazards have been plagued by myriad problems, including:

At Francis Polytechnic High School in Sun Valley, methane gas from a nearby landfill has filled buildings to explosive levels on several occasions, and a crucial computer monitoring system was inoperable for a year.

A system installed to clean toxics from the soil at Jefferson New Middle School in south Los Angeles was so poorly placed that it spewed potentially dangerous residue over students sitting at outdoor lunch tables and into the intake ducts of the heating and air-conditioning system.

At Towne Avenue Elementary School in Carson, a school adjacent to a landfill, upkeep of the methane monitoring system wasn't done for years even though Los Angeles County was paying the school district to do it. The LAUSD installed classroom sensors improperly, potentially exposing teachers and students to explosive gases.

"The LAUSD's past record shows that they can't maintain these things. It scares me to death," said John Robertson, a former Cudahy city councilman and petroleum engineer regarded as an expert witness on gas migration.

The district safety team has gone into all 11 schools this year and conducted spot testing, finding no immediate health hazards, although state environmental officials say those preliminary results are inconclusive.

"There has been a significant failure in the district's safety program to ensure the protection of the schools' populations," said Angelo Bellomo, an environmental consultant hired by the district, who studied all the sites as a member of the LAUSD's new safety team.

"There can be no assurances, based on my review of available documents, that chemical exposures did not occur on those campuses," he said.

The investigations began after the school board learned several schools were operating with environmental monitoring or cleanup systems - a revelation that surprised them.

Some officials say the most troubling situation may be Park Avenue Elementary School in Cudahy, a campus that was put on the state Superfund toxic cleanup list.

Reminiscent of the Belmont scandal, the development of Park Avenue features district officials so eager to build on cheap land that they acknowledged hazards only when they were made public in embarrassing headlines.

Some of the same officials now facing disciplinary action for their role in Belmont also were responsible for Park Avenue. Before Park Avenue was built, the property had been used for the Cudahy Dump, the Vloedman Dump and B.H. Steepleton Landfill - ominous precursors to a carcinogenic black ooze that bubbled up on the campus playground after the school opened in 1968.

The ooze flowed for 19 years as children developed rashes, headaches, stomach aches and lethargy.

The school was added to the Superfund list in 1987, but district officials didn't tell parents. Tests later showed the goo was loaded with pyrene and benzo pyrene, both carcinogenic, as well as lead and potential carcinogens. Some samples were so caustic that they burned like battery acid.

Eventually, interim safeguards were installed. An angry state senator held hearings and pushed through a strict environmental law for school sites. In August 1990, the state ordered the district to perform extensive testing at Park Avenue to define the extent of the contamination and determine what ultimate safeguards were needed.

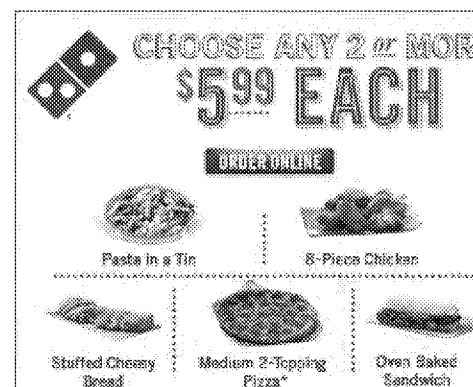
Over time, as the furor died down, the district quietly asked the state for more time to do the testing. The district received an extension to 1992 and then 1993, after claiming "budgetary restraints."

The tests have not been done, and no records of environmental monitoring have

BELMONT MAY BE DROPPED; PANEL EXPECTED TO VOTE TODAY ON COMPLEX'S FATE.

EDITORIAL : ZACARIAS FAILED TO LEAD; THE BOARD DID THE ONLY THING IT COULD.

SCHOOL SITES TAINTED; AUDIT ASSAILS POLLUTED LAND PURCHASES.



been turned over to the state as required in a consent decree.

Panos said he had no idea that the consent decree had not been completed. However, he said that the district has done monthly monitoring at Park. He said records have been sent to the state, and he does not understand why the state is unaware of them.

Protections weakened

Mullinax said the missteps at Park Avenue should cause board members to carefully consider whether to go forward with Belmont.

``What assurances do they have that the same thing that happened at Park won't happen at Belmont?" he said.

Lawmakers and community activists - and even the environmental consultant working for the district at the time who mapped out the safety plan - never knew that the work at Park Avenue was not completed.

And the strict environmental law authored by former Sen. Art Torres, a Los Angeles Democrat, was weakened the next year in legislation the LAUSD sought to allow school construction on hazardous sites if the local school board votes that the dangers are not significant.

Torres, who as a state senator led hearings into concerns at Park Avenue in 1989, said the district's failure to follow through was ``tragic" - and called for the matter to be referred to the state Attorney General's Office.

``This is absolutely inexcusable," said Torres, now chairman of the California Democratic Party. ``I don't understand how the district, or the state, could let this fall through the cracks."

In 1990, Bellomo was a project manager for McLaren, an environmental company that mapped out the interim safeguards for Park Avenue. In an interview last week, Bellomo said he was stunned to learn that testing had not been done and added that the district's current safety team had not been told of the problem.

``The purpose of the interim measures was only to stabilize conditions at the site," Bellomo said. ``The consent decree was allowed to sit idle for years when there should have been follow-up."

Records show that the state put no pressure on the district to fulfill its promises. The only action the agency took was a four-year campaign to collect from the LAUSD the more than \$145,000 in fees for their initial monitoring work. They ended up settling for \$49,000 last year.

``They told us they had no funding. What else could we do?" said Hamid Saebfar, the chief of Southern California cleanup operations branch for the state's Department of Toxic Substances Control.

The state still wants the LAUSD to do the in-depth tests at Park Avenue, even though the initial work done years ago appeared to eliminate an immediate health threat, a state spokesman said.

``We still believe a complete investigation of the site needs to occur," DTSC spokesman Ron Baker said.

Cudahy Mayor George Perez, a parent with two children at Park Avenue at the time of the Senate hearings, said his concern pushed him into politics. Perez said the city was not informed that the added safeguards were not installed.

``It's mind-boggling that this problem has been ignored," he said. ``When I was working on this as a parent, I was convinced that we were being taken advantage of. Now I'm in a position to see that this gets taken care of."

CAPTION(S):

photo, map, box

Photo: Cudahy Mayor George Perez finds it ``mind-boggling" that added safeguards were not installed at Park Avenue Elementary.

Hans Gutknecht/Staff Photographer

Map: Environmentally troubled schools

The Los Angeles Unified School District has 11 campuses with systems in place to protect against know environmental hazards.

1. Third Street Elementary School -- 201 S. June St., Los Angeles
2. Towne Avenue Elementary School -- 18924 Towne Ave., Carson
3. Business Industry Adult School -- 3721 Washington Blvd., Los Angeles
4. Arminta Elementary School -- 11530 Strathern St., North Hollywood
5. Francis Polytechnic High School -- 12431 Roscoe Blvd., Sun Valley
6. Francisco Bravo Medical Magnet High School -- 1200 N. Cornwell St., Los Angeles
7. Germain Street Elementary School -- 20730 Germain St., Chatsworth
8. Hancock Park Elementary School -- 408 S. Fairfax Ave., Los Angeles
9. Park Avenue Elementary School -- 8020 Park Ave., Cudahy
10. Evelyn Thurman Gratts Elementary School -- 309 Lucas Ave., Los Angeles
11. Jefferson New Middle School -- 644 East 56th St., Los Angeles

Source: Los Angeles Unified School District

Box: The details


COPYRIGHT 1999 Daily News

No portion of this article can be reproduced without the express written permission from the copyright holder.

Copyright 1999, Gale Group. All rights reserved. Gale Group is a Thomson Corporation Company.

**Please bookmark with social media, your votes are noticed and appreciated:**



Reader ratings:  0 [0 vote(s)] You can rate this article by selecting 1 to 5 stars on the left.

#### Reader Opinion

Title:

Comment:

Submit

[The Free Library > Communications > News, opinion and commentary > Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\) > October 31, 1999](#)  
[The Free Library > General Interest/Informational > General interest > Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\) > October 31, 1999](#)  
[The Free Library > Date > 1999 > October > 31 > Daily News \(Los Angeles, CA\)](#)

| Publications by Name  | Publications by Date   | Authors  | Literature   |
|---|--|--|--|
| <a href="#">A-E</a> <a href="#">O-P</a> <a href="#">T-U</a> <a href="#">Z</a> | <a href="#">before 1995</a> <a href="#">1995-1999</a><br><a href="#">2000-2004</a> <a href="#">2005-2009</a> <a href="#">2010-</a> | <a href="#">A</a> <a href="#">B</a> <a href="#">C</a> <a href="#">D</a> <a href="#">E</a> <a href="#">F</a> <a href="#">G</a> <a href="#">H</a> <a href="#">I</a> <a href="#">J</a> <a href="#">K</a> <a href="#">L</a> <a href="#">M</a><br><a href="#">N</a> <a href="#">O</a> <a href="#">P</a> <a href="#">Q</a> <a href="#">R</a> <a href="#">S</a> <a href="#">T</a> <a href="#">U</a> <a href="#">V</a> <a href="#">W</a> <a href="#">X</a> <a href="#">Y</a> <a href="#">Z</a> | <a href="#">A</a> <a href="#">B</a> <a href="#">C</a> <a href="#">D</a> <a href="#">E</a> <a href="#">F</a> <a href="#">G</a> <a href="#">H</a> <a href="#">I</a> <a href="#">J</a> <a href="#">K</a> <a href="#">L</a> <a href="#">M</a><br><a href="#">N</a> <a href="#">O</a> <a href="#">P</a> <a href="#">Q</a> <a href="#">R</a> <a href="#">S</a> <a href="#">T</a> <a href="#">U</a> <a href="#">V</a> <a href="#">W</a> <a href="#">X</a> <a href="#">Y</a> <a href="#">Z</a> |

[Terms of use](#) | [Copyright © 2014 Farlex, Inc.](#) | [Feedback](#) | [For webmasters](#)